

Twenty-year-old construction worker killed in Baltimore trench collapse

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8 June 2018

A 20-year-old construction worker was found dead at the bottom of a deep trench at a Baltimore construction site early Wednesday morning. Kyle Hancock, of Glen Burnie, Maryland was killed Tuesday after being crushed by dirt and debris that had collapsed on top of him while working on a backed-up sewage line from a recreation center in Northeast Baltimore's Clifton Park.

The Baltimore Fire Department's Special Operations Command unit removed two other construction workers from the trench and erected a protective barrier before they began to dig. The unit removed about 20 feet of muddy debris and dirt for over 10 hours before unearthing Hancock's body around 1:30 a.m. on Wednesday.

No protective barriers had been erected before workers initially dug the over 15-foot-deep trench to reach the sewer line that Hancock was working on when he was killed. Hancock's body was crushed under thousands of pounds of falling dirt and debris, with just one cubic yard of soil weighing up to 3,000 pounds. According to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) guidelines, trenches over five feet deep must have safety measures such as shored-up walls, sloped ways out, and shields to protect workers from collapsing soil and debris.

Hancock worked as a contract laborer for R.F. Warder, Inc., the contractor hired out to do the work on the sewage line. It is not clear what credentials or city permits the company had prior to beginning work. In Maryland, there are currently no special license requirements to dig trenches. The company declined to provide comment on the death, according to the *Baltimore Sun*. The investigation into the cause of the trench collapse is expected to take weeks.

According to an online obituary, Hancock was employed with the Steamfitters Local Union and was

working toward a career in HVAC and plumbing. He enjoyed soccer and "spending time with his small circle of close friends...his family, and his dog Max. Kyle's sense of humor will be missed."

In contrast to most worker deaths which go largely unreported, Hancock's death received a notable amount of press coverage, including coverage the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*. This is not a sign that the media on the whole is more concerned about reporting on the rising rate of workplace fatalities, but that the issue has become so increasingly common in the lives of workers that it is difficult to ignore.

Deaths from construction work in the United States have steadily increased in recent years. The rate of fatal injury in construction work rose from 9.7 per 100,000 in 2008 to 10.1 per 100,000 by 2015. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics' Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries reported 991 construction industry deaths in 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, making construction the deadliest occupation in the country. The number of construction deaths in 2016 rose from 937 in 2015, itself an increase from 885 in 2014.

The Trump Administration has worked toward eliminating safety measures and training for workers, including funding cuts to OSHA, as a part of its promises to corporations to cut back on federal spending for social services. The groundwork for the drastic cuts had been laid by the Obama Administration, which cut millions of dollars in government spending for programs benefiting workers. These included cuts to OSHA staff and other workplace safety programs. The total number of workers who were reported to have died each year from occupational injuries during the Obama Administration rose from 4,551 in 2009 to 5,190 in 2016.

Hancock's death comes one month after the Trump Administration revealed plans to relax child labor laws in the United States by proposing a measure that will give free rein to businesses to allow teenagers under the age of 18 to operate hazardous equipment such as chainsaws, trash compactors and meat cutters for longer hours under apprenticeship and training programs.

In 2017, another young construction worker, 19-year-old Destiny Rodriguez, was killed while working with her brother at the bottom of a 15-foot trench in San Antonio, Texas when she was crushed by a backhoe digger that had dropped into the hole.

Baltimore's Democratic Mayor Catherine Pugh met Hancock's family Tuesday night at the scene of his death. She issued no official statement of condolence, but used the event to prop up her own political career and provide cover for any possible wrongdoing on the part of the city. "They worked tirelessly, tirelessly through the night," she said referring to the excavation team. "This was a reminder of the dedication of the people that work for us."

Pugh did not make any official mention of the federal budget cuts of the Obama and Trump administrations that contribute to such disasters, nor did she call for any increase in funding for workers' safety programs.

Neither the Democratic or Republican parties, who serve the interests of the corporate ruling elite, have any answer to the conditions that have caused an alarming increase in the number of occupational deaths in the United States. The relentless drive for profit has led the two big business parties to pass legislation that strips away safety measures for workers so that more money can flow into the coffers of the rich. Only an organized movement of the working class and youth to put an end to the profit system will ensure the right to a safe and healthy workplace for all.



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